

Cuban Missile Crisis

22 Oct 1962

The Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in October 1962, after U.S. intelligence reconnaissance flights verified reports that the USSR was constructing launching sites for medium-range and intermediate-range nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba. The USSR apparently hoped to achieve a more favorable balance of power, to protect the Cuban Communist government of Fidel Castro (which the United States had attempted to overthrow in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961), to gain greater diplomatic leverage vis-a-vis the United States, to damage U.S. credibility, and to achieve greater influence in Latin America.

President John F. KENNEDY rejected military advice for a full-scale surprise attack on Cuba and instead delivered a public ultimatum to the USSR on October 22. He declared a "quarantine," or naval blockade, of Cuba and demanded withdrawal of all offensive missiles. After nearly two weeks of unprecedented tension, the Soviet government of Nikita Khrushchev yielded. Kennedy, in return, agreed to refrain from attempting an overthrow of Castro's government. Despite this concession, all sides regarded the outcome as a substantial victory for the United States, and Kennedy won a reputation as a formidable international statesman. The USSR began a long-term effort to strengthen its military capability, but in the immediate future both nations sought to relax hostilities.

In the late 1980s several unique conferences of U.S., Soviet, and Cuban officials and scholars contributed new revelations and perspective to the historical record of the crisis.

Alonzo L. Hamby

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Paul Dean Carlson in Cuban Missile

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Kennedy confronting Andrei Gromyko (Picture)



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President Kennedy (left) met with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko (right foreground) at the White House as events surrounding the Cuban missile crisis unfolded. Kennedy had already seen aerial reconnaissance photos of Soviet missile bases under construction in Cuba. From these bases a nuclear attack could be launched on much of the United States. Unsatisfied with the Soviet's response, Kennedy went on television four days later (Oct. 22, 1962) with a dramatic announcement: a United States air and naval quarantine on all offensive weapons headed for Cuba. After an anxious week, the Russians backed down. (The Bettmann Archive)



Gromyko, Andrei

{grah-mee'-koh, ahn-dray'}

Andrey Andreyevich Gromyko, b. Belorussia July 18 (N.S.), 1909, d. Moscow, July 2, 1989, was Soviet foreign minister from 1957 to 1985 and president of the USSR from 1985 to 1988. Gromyko began his professional career at the Institute of Economics of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In 1931 he became a member of the Communist party. He entered the diplomatic corps in 1939 and, in 1943, replaced Maksim LITVINOV as ambassador to the United States. Gromyko led the Soviet delegation at the founding of the United Nations at DUMBARTON OAKS in 1944, and took part in the TĒHRĀN CONFERENCE, YALTA CONFERENCE and POTSDAM CONFERENCE. He was made permanent representative of the USSR to the United Nations in 1946, first deputy foreign minister in 1949, and foreign minister in 1957, by which time he had become (1956) a full member of the Central Committee of the Communist party. A member of the ruling Politburo from 1973 and chief executor of the policy of DETĒNTE with the United States, he was an early ally of Mikhail GORBACHEV, who became party leader in 1985. Gromyko served as president until his retirement in 1988.

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Castro, Fidel

Fidel Castro Ruz, Cuba's enduring "maximum leader," has held power since 1959. He is president (since 1976; formerly prime minister), first secretary of the Cuban Communist party, and commander of the armed forces. His decisions are final on matters of domestic and foreign policy.

Castro was born on Aug. 13, 1926 (some sources give 1927), on a farm in Mayari municipality in the province of Oriente. He attended good Catholic schools in Santiago de Cuba and Havana, where he took to the spartan regime at a Jesuit boarding school, Colegio de Belen. In 1945 he enrolled at the University of Havana, graduating in 1950 with a law degree. He married Mirta Diaz-Balart in 1948, but they were divorced in 1954. Their son, Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart, born in 1949, has served as head of Cuba's atomic energy commission. A member of the social-democratic Ortodoxo party in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Castro was an early and vocal opponent of the dictatorship of Fulgencio BATISTA. On July 26, 1953, Castro led an attack on the Moncada army barracks that failed but brought him national prominence. At the time, his political ideas were nationalist, antiimperialist, and reformist; he was not a member of the Communist party.

Following the attack on Moncada, Castro was tried and sentenced to 15 years in prison but was amnestied in 1955. He then went into exile in Mexico, where he founded the 26th of July Movement, vowing to return to Cuba in order to fight against Batista. In December 1956, he and 81 others, including Che GUEVARA, returned to Cuba and made their way to the Sierra Maestra mountains, from which they launched a successful guerrilla war. Castro proved himself a strong leader; he also demonstrated shrewd political skills, convinced that he had a historic duty to change the character of Cuban society. Seeing his army collapse, and unable to count on the support of the United States, Batista fled on Jan. 1, 1959, paving the way for Castro's rise to power.

In its early phase, Castro's revolutionary regime included moderate politicians and democrats; gradually, however, its policies became radical and confrontational. Castro remained the unchallenged leader, and the masses—whose living conditions he improved—rallied behind him. Promises of elections were unfulfilled, foreign-owned properties confiscated, and opponents of the regime killed or driven into exile. Thousands of middle-class and professional Cubans left the island once it became clear that a Communist revolution was under way.

The U.S.-supported BAY OF PIGS INVASION failed (1961), and Castro was able to consolidate his power. In December 1961 he publicly declared that "I have been a Marxist-Leninist all along, and will remain one until I die." Cuba aligned itself with the Soviet Union, which granted Cuba massive economic, technical, and military assistance. In 1962 the CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS dramatized the Cuban-Soviet alliance. In 1979 he was elected chairman of the Nonaligned Nations Movement, a position that gained him some international prestige. Castro believes that he has a revolutionary duty to fight imperialism in the developing world; he dispatched troops to assist Marxist regimes in Angola and Ethiopia. He remains a caustic critic of U.S. foreign policy.

Castro, who has no rivals for power, demands the absolute loyalty of those around him. He has been less than successful as an economic policymaker: Cuba remains a poor country in debt whose livelihood depends on sugar production. He nonetheless holds the system in place. His greatest achievement is the consolidation of a Communist regime in the Caribbean, so close to Cuba's main antagonist. In no small measure, the Cuban revolution is still Castro's revolution.

Juan M. del Aguila

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